



# Manhole covers

**The most important numismatic items in the history of the world**

Presented by Gerald Tebben

# Numismatic?

Manhole covers are, of course, numismatic items.

They are:

- Round (mostly)

- Have dates (often)

- Have value (kind of)

(Though trying to turn one in at the scrapyard will likely result in a trip to jail.)

# Numismatic?

Manhole covers can also be viewed as medals, very large medals, that have been used to:



commemorate events, such as Albuquerque's tricentennial

# Numismatic?



And fashioned into works of art, such as this manhole cover from Osaka, Japan.

# Numismatic?



**“Manhole covers are the secret cousins of coins.”**

Photographer Allan Sekula's introduction to *Manhole Covers* by Robert and Mimi Melnick

(MIT Press, 1994, 274 pages, \$27.67 on Amazon)





But what makes the manhole cover the most important numismatic item in the history of the world is its function. Unlike their smaller brethren of tiny coins, tokens and medals, manhole covers save lives. Without them, countless inattentive people, especially people texting on cellphones, would be falling down manholes, sometimes fatally.

Coins, even the Mint's 5-ounce quarter dollars, can't do the job. A silver dollar, for example, doesn't even begin to cover a manhole. Totally worthless!



Stan Laurel narrowly avoids death in a manhole accident during the filming of the 1928 silent film, *You're Darn Tootin'*

# History

Manhole covers have a long history, perhaps even longer than coins'.



The first coins date from about 600 BC. These first coins were lumps of electrum bearing images of animals. Some think the first “coins” were not even made for commerce, but rather for religious purposes.



# History

Manhole covers, though, were formed fully functional sometime in antiquity. As soon as Rome started digging sewers, they needed a way to keep people from falling into them.



This 1<sup>st</sup> century AD manhole cover was excavated in the Roman military camp at Vindobona, now known as Vienna.

# 19<sup>th</sup> century



The Dark Ages for manhole covers apparently extended from late Roman times to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. They reappear in Civil War-era foundry catalogs. The early manhole covers in Victoria, B.C., are believed to have been produced in Scotland and shipped to North America as ballast in sailing ships.

# Manhole cover nomenclature



Pickhole: A lacuna or recessed area designed to receive the sharp end of a pick or a grappling hook so the access cover can be pried up.

# Manhole cover nomenclature

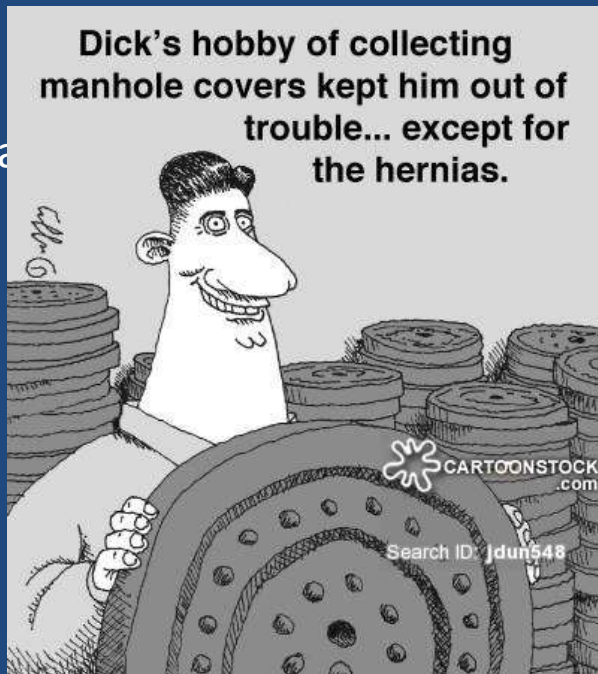


Square knobs: Raised protuberances found especially on pre-1920 manhole covers. They functioned as hoof-holds for horses.



# Collecting manhole covers

There are two ways to collect manhole covers



## Virtual

I think we all do this. You walk down the street you notice the designs and dates at your feet.

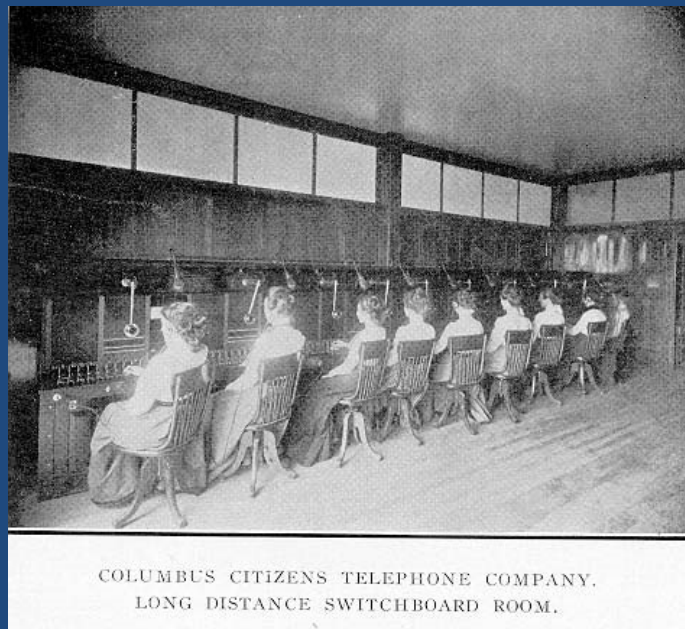
## Actual

Manhole covers are big – almost two feet across – and heavy –100 to 200 pounds, so this can be difficult.



# Virtual collecting

These urban artifacts contain our city's and our personal history.



In Downtown Columbus you can still find a manhole cover or two from the independent Citizens Telephone Co., which operated from 1899 to the 1910s when it was absorbed into the United States Telephone Co.

# Virtual collecting



The dates on manhole covers and their locations speak to our personal histories. My mom grew up in Clintonville and courted an Arlington boy in the mid-1930s. They married in 1937 and set up house on Como Ave. They moved away at the end of World War II and I returned in 1974 with a wife and child. I like to look at the dates on Clintonville manhole covers and reflect on their lives and my own.

A manhole cover at Kelso and High bears the date 1927. When I walk past it I muse that my parents probably stepped on it while going to a night of Big Band dancing at Olentangy Amusement Park in the 1930s.

# Actual collecting

The grading services refuse to grade manhole covers, probably because every last one has environmental damage and nobody makes body bags big enough.

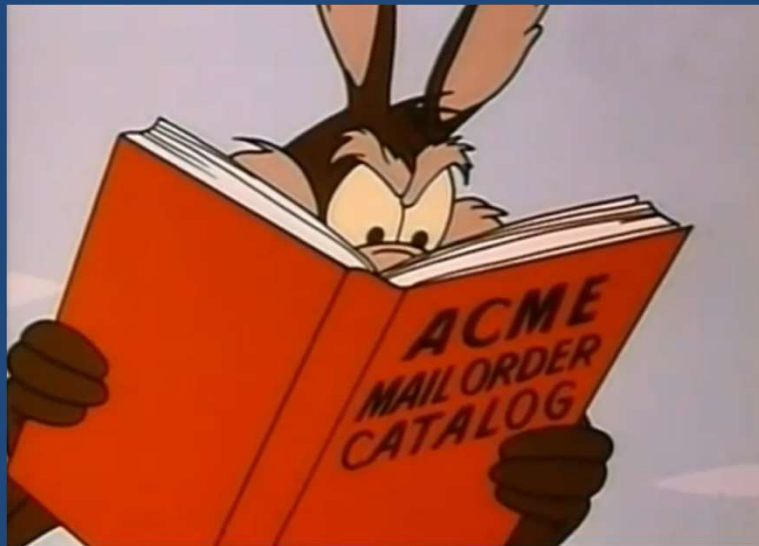
Grading: All manhole covers are mint state on one side and worn and subject to environmental damage from blacktop and oil on the other. Grading, then, is restricted to the top or obverse side.



*If the grading services handled manhole covers, this piece would come back in a Genuine Env. Damage – VG Details slab. White paint and asphalt are evidence of environmental damage. Heavy wear shows at the denticles.*

# Actual collecting

Storage: Unfortunately, the major manufactures have conspired against manhole cover collectors. You can't buy a 2x2, Cointain or Capital Plastics holder for your manhole cover collection.



However, the ACME Mail Order Catalog has all the parts you need to make your own 4x4s, 4-feet-by-4-feet holders. ( At 22-24 inches, manhole covers are too big to fit in a standard 2-feet-by-2-feet holder.)

# Making your own holder

Wooden insert (most economical):

1 - 4x8 sheet of Plytanium 23/32 CAT PS1-09 Pine Sanded Plywood (\$32)

Cut in half

Cut a 24-inch hole in the center of each piece

Cement the two pieces together to form the insert.

2 - 4x4 ACRYLIC P95 Clear  $\frac{1}{4}$ " Sheets (\$129 each) for the covers

Stack the elements together and drill a 1-inch hole in each corner.

4 - 1" joint connector bolts

4 - 1" rivet nuts

(For an all-plastic holder, substitute a 4x4 ACRYLIC P95 Clear 1" Sheet (\$636) for the plywood insert.)





# My collection



In 2007, the city was doing sewer work in my neighborhood. The contractor rented my garage to store the manhole covers. I charged one manhole cover. It hasn't moved since.